

## Marginalisation, Health and Ambedkar: Connects between Sanitation Workers and State Response

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### Abstract

Denial of access to resources and services to some individuals and groups is a universal phenomenon which has existed over time and space and has varied from class, race, ethnicity, religion and gender, caste. However, is a unique determinant of social discrimination in the Indian Sub-continent- an evil against which Dr Ambedkar fought relentlessly throughout his lifetime; experienced the menace himself, but secured instruments to ensure the safeguards for the others. The process of caste based social discrimination is embedded in religion and history and thus accentuates the deprivation and denial among those engaged in cleaning occupations. Workers engaged in sanitation and allied works are categorized as sewerage workers and sweepers. While sewerage workers are all men, sweepers are men and women both. They are employed as permanent, temporary, daily wage, and contract workers as sweepers, drain and manhole cleaners, night soil carriers and rag pickers. The concern for these workers in terms of salary, safety gears and protective instruments has been minimal is evident from the fact that death of the workers engaged in India for these jobs is highest globally. From the MDGs to the SDGs and the national programmes on sanitation, the concern has been on the coverage. The workers ensuring the coverage are excluded from most opportunities.

The present paper endeavours to examine the status of sanitation workers and the factors which lead to their continuing with this work. The endeavor is also, therefore to understand the policy environment and the consequences.

**Keywords:** Marginalisation; Health; Sanitation Workers; Gender identities and Dalit

### Introduction

The year 2017 marks 126th birth anniversary of Dr BR Ambedkar-father of the Indian Constitution. While the nation pays tribute to the legend once again, it is ironical that his efforts to uplift the Dalits, show little progress in

the issue which was close to his heart. Dr Ambedkar rigorously campaigned against social discrimination and categorization of work based on caste. His untiring efforts against the practice of manual scavenging, a hideous

practice of cleaning the human excreta from latrines manually, could be realized, albeit partially, only as late as 2013 with the passage of the Act. While the legislative measure has been enacted, social efforts to execute it remain desirable. It has been often argued that illness does not discriminate. It affects anyone who could be physiologically vulnerable irrespective of social and gender identities. However, disparities in health outcomes are visible along multiple axes. Morbidity, mortality and access to health care differ across gender, caste, ethnicity and even region, despite universal access to health care being the vantage point for health planning. Existing literature and data sources reiterate the relevance of recognizing these axes, some of which accentuate the vulnerabilities in specific ways.

The present paper endeavours to examine caste as a social determinant of health especially for those engaging in specific occupations. This has been attempted in the light of Ambedkar's ideas on health and the initiatives taken by him in his various roles in the state governance. Therefore, present paper attempts to highlight the thinker in Dr. BR Ambedkar, who amidst his scholarship as an economist, political scientist, and statesman and above all, humanist, addressed the concerns for health.

### Ambedkar's Concern for Health

Ambedkar, in all probabilities, is the most learned and most educated Minister which the nation has had in its checkered history of 70 years after the independence. He was a great visionary and an erudite scholar who argued, initiated and acted upon ideas which mark a new era for the oppressed. Jawaharlal Nehru described Dr BR Ambedkar as 'Jewel of his Cabinet'. A great visionary, genius and revolutionary in his own rights, BR Ambedkar is remembered in many ways. He trained himself to become a masterly statesman, a powerful debater, valiant upholder of human rights, social reformer and crusader of the depressed classes. He was an eminent economist, an informed democrat, a committed patriot and dedicated educationist. He held important positions as the Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constitution of India, the first Law Minister of the independent India and the most vocal voice of the downtrodden people. He deeply empathized with the suppressed classes in India who have suffered for ages under the social system. He used the term 'Dalit' in his Marathi speeches and translated it as 'Broken Men' to refer to the original ancestors of the untouchables. Later this term was expanded to include Scheduled Tribes, Neo- Buddhists, the working people, the landless and the poor peasant, women, and all those

who are exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion. However, in the present realm of the administrative paradigm, the term denotes the Scheduled Caste communities.

Ambedkar's initial reflections on social justice was evident in late 1920s. Fully equipped with his doctoral and post- doctoral research from premium institutions of the world-Columbia and London School of Economics and Political Science and Gray's Inn, which very few Indians would have achieved, he returned to India. In 1927, as Chairman of Satyagraha Committee of the Dalit Movement, he addressed a huge gathering of Dalits mostly Mahars in Chavdar Tank in Mahad Taluka of Maharashtra. This was the beginning of the fight for the right to equality for having drinking water from the tank which was traditionally denied to the Dalits. This also echoed the beginning of his concern for the health of the people. Access to safe drinking water was important for the suppressed. He recognized the need for potable water and was articulating social justice as an optimist. He was hopeful of socio-structural relocation of Dalits on an equal footing with non-Dalits. He was fascinated by the social transformation in Europe, particularly in France, in the wake of the French National Assembly Proclamations of 1789 for political, social and religious reorganization of the French society. He was influenced by the Proclamation- 'All human beings are equal by birth, and they shall remain equal till death. They may be distinguished in status only in the public interest. Otherwise their equal status must be maintained [1]. This influence was subsequently consolidated and reflected in the concern for the oppressed. It was his efforts which got the maternity benefits to working women in 1942; abolished gender discrimination through Articles 14, 15, 16, 21, 38(2), and 39(i) and (ii). He was aware of the gender based discrimination prevalent in the Indian sub-continent. As Law Minister, he introduced the Hindu Code Bill which brought women at par with men. However, the then social system was not ready for this path breaking deviance from the norm. The patriarchal structures as well as the polity opposed the Bill. He firmly believed that development of a country was dependent on social status of women. The two schools of Hindu Law- Mitakshara and Dayabhaga denied women any right to inheritance and economic stability in the absence of a male relative. The Hindu Code Bill suggested by Ambedkar made women worthy of those rights denied to them. This Bill was key to the liberty of women. He was thinking much ahead of his time. Gender equality was later propagated by the UN agencies to address health and development.

His ideas on women's health was reflected in the Bombay Legislative Council discussion on 10 November 1938 in which disability of the parents was acknowledged as the prime reason for impacting on children physically, mentally and financially. He was one of the forerunners who saw the reproductive rights of women as important for their development. He proposed limiting the number of births for the health of the women and the children instead of the conventional stand of controlling the population. He also saw this as a measure to prevent maternal and infant deaths and reduce morbidity among them. Mica Mines Labour Welfare Fund Bill was to safeguard the rights of the workers who suffered from diseases directly attributable to mining operations. Maternity Benefits to women Mine workers was extended and working underground was prohibited for women. Through his intellectual exhumation, he brought the notion of justice, equality, liberty and fraternity on the forefront of socio-political landscape and sensitized people especially the downtrodden in the contemporary India. In his framework of thought, justice and equality were to be complemented by liberty and fraternity, both at the individual as well as social level and collectively understood as social justice. His concern for the vulnerable and the marginalized; and for the health is an obvious culmination of connecting the two for an enquiry. Those engaging in sanitation are from vulnerable groups and therefore the access to resources is likely to be poor. In addition, most of them are Dalits. The belief of impurity encourages segregation and ensures invisibility hindering exchange of information especially health related which is of extreme important for sanitation workers. Glorification of manual scavenging as a 'spiritual experience' holds no waters. Ambedkar calls it "the practice of territorial segregation a cordon sanitaire" and said: "... in India a man is not a scavenger because of his work. He is a scavenger because of his birth irrespective of the question whether he does scavenging or not." [2]. Equating it with spirituality appears to be a well-designed plan to ensure continuance of this deplorable practice by subjugating a specific set of people.

## State of Sanitation Workers

The sanitation workers are categorized as sewerage workers and sweepers. While sewerage workers are all men, sweepers are men and women both. They are employed as permanent, temporary, daily wage, and contract workers as sweepers, drain and manhole cleaners, night soil carriers and rag pickers. Those who complete 900 days of working are registered as permanent workers. Most of them are contractual and

temporary workers who do not have any necessary claim to compensation in case of any accident during their work. Sanitation workers are engaged to do manual scavenging. They clean dry latrines used by others manually. They carry in buckets, baskets in their hands or on heads and in the wheel barrows. Amongst those involved in head-loading, 98% are women [3]. They are forced to do this work under social pressure<sup>1</sup>. This work is caste based and is considered compulsory for a particular caste within the 'Dalit' community by traditional society, it has not remained merely an occupation but has continued as a practice and custom<sup>2</sup>. The caste based social structure in which sanitation workers are located is largely the 'Dalit' community which has been excluded from a dignified right to life and have remained backward in education, livelihoods, access to services, schemes and opportunities to live a life with dignity. Most grievous situation → their forced retention in caste based and hereditary occupation. They are not free and allowed to select occupations of its choice.

The sanitation workers collect the human excreta with their brooms and tinplate and carry it to a disposable ground. This work division has continued based upon the traditional Hindu social order, which allowed division of labour and assigned the Dalits the dirty and mean jobs and the 2011 Census data confirms the continuation of same. In addition to facing apathy from the society, sanitation workers are at a risk of diseases such as dysentery, malaria, typhoid, skin infections, tuberculosis and exposure to toxic gases in sewers.

## Dignity of Sanitation Workers

At this time point when the country is boasting of fairly impressive growth, the nation has not been able to rid itself of considering 'cleaning' as polluting because there is an element of caste-based hierarchy entrenched in the mindsets of Indians, irrespective of religion. Despite the Act banning Manual Scavenging, the country still has

<sup>1</sup>Report of Taskforce for Tackling the Problems of Scavengers and Suggesting Measures to Abolish Scavenging with Particular Emphasis on Rehabilitation. GOI Planning Commission 1990-91

<sup>2</sup>Malkani Committee Report N.R. Malkani, as Chairman examined the question of the abolition of customary rights of the scavengers. The Committee submitted its report to the Government in 1966.

more than about 700,000 persons engaged in scavenging<sup>3</sup>. Unlike other nations where caste does not exist, such caste-based entrenchment into unclean jobs is also absent. The West, although, generates more garbage than us, but they treat their cleaners with dignity. Their cleaning brigade does not need to be freed from dehumanizing, obnoxious, abhorrent and disgusting practice of caste-based discrimination. They enjoy the dignity of being human as much the others do and therefore the state also cares to provide them with safety equipment. By any standards of measurements, there are more accidents and deaths which have occurred in India among 'SafaiKaramcharis' (sanitation workers) while at work than anywhere else in the world. At least 22,327 Dalits die doing sanitation work every year. Safai Kamgar Vikas Sangh (SKVS), a body representing sanitation workers of the Brihan Mumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), sought data under the Right to Information Act in 2006. It revealed that 288 workers died in 2004-05, 316 in 2003-04, and 320 in 2002-03, in just 14 of the 24 wards of the BMC amounting to about 25 deaths every month. These figures do not include civic hospital workers, gutter cleaners or sanitation workers on contract. Compare this with the 5,100 soldiers -army, police, paramilitaries- who have died between 1990 and 2007- during 17 years, combating militancy in various parts of the country [4,5].

As regards the protective gears and equipment, in most developed nations, workers are protected in bunny suits to avoid contact with contaminated water and sport a respiratory apparatus. Sewers are well-lit, mechanically aerated with huge fans and therefore are not oxygen deficient. In Hong Kong, a sewer worker, after adequate training, needs at least 15 licenses and permits to enter a manhole. The entry-level salary of a sanitation worker in New York is \$30,000 per year. In the sixth year, he could earn \$67,141 (Rs 2.18 lakh per month). In India, your license to become a sewer worker is the all-pervasive caste identity...! In India, the worker wears nothing more than a loincloth or half-pants. Permanent workers wear a "safety belt" which helps haul them out when they faint or die inside the sewer. In India, a permanent sanitation worker with 20 years' experience is likely to make Rs 12,000 a month [6-8].

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. Government of India.

Independent estimates by SafaiKaramcharAbhiyan suggests the numbers to be more than twelve lakh manual scavengers in the country.

A multicity study<sup>4</sup> on the sanitation workers reflects that access to protective gears varies from city to city. Surat with its post plague consciousness and the declaration by WHO as cleanest city has close to 90% workers reporting access to protective gears and only a quarter of them reported any problems arising out of their use. Bhubaneshwar and Nagpur, although had only about 40% workers reporting access only about half of them reported any kind of problems faced by them in using these gears. Most of the problems reported were related to the improper fitting of the gears like boots and gloves including uniforms (Table 1) [9].

Protective gear/ equipment	Delhi		Surat		Nagpur		Gangtok		Bhubaneshwar	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
<b>Have Any</b>	147	51	111	87.4	92	40.5	134	49.8	92	39.7
<b>Type*</b>										
<b>Helmet</b>	8	2.8	4	2	1	0.5	4	1.5	0	0
<b>Mask</b>	53	18.4	65	31.7	29	13.4	49	18.2	18	4.7
<b>Uniform</b>	129	44.8	57	27.8	75	34.6	114	42.4	149	88.2
<b>Gloves</b>	64	22.2	54	26.3	74	34.1	61	22.7	16	3.6
<b>Boot</b>	12	4.2	8	3.9	6	2.8	8	3	11	0.6
<b>Brooms</b>	22	7.6	10	4.9	21	9.7	20	7.4	15	3
<b>Mops</b>	0	0	7	3.4	11	5.1	13	4.8	0	0
<b>Problems Related to protective gear/ equipment</b>										
<b>Workers Reporting Problems</b>	60	41	26	23.4	52	85.4	54	77.1	35	43.9
<b>Total</b>	288	100	127	100	227	100	269	100	232	100

Table1: Use of Protective gear/ equipment By Sanitation Workers in Different Cities  
Note-Workers have multiple gears

Social inclusion of vulnerable populations who have been historically excluded has been the focus of the governments, sympathizer and affected communities, groups and individuals, the genesis of which began with the drafting of the Constitution with Dr. Ambedkar in the Chair. Understanding the elements and processes which create a social divide has been a continuous intellectual

<sup>4</sup>Acharya, Sanghmitra S (2016) Conservancy Works and Social Discrimination- Determinants and Consequences for Young Population' ICSSR New Delhi.

pursuit despite the fact that subordination and marginalization of those engaged in scavenging and cleaning is fairly well recognized. Dr. Ambedkar fought relentlessly throughout his lifetime; experienced the menace of caste based discrimination himself, but secured instruments to ensure the safeguards for the others.

## Vulnerability and Double Disadvantage of Women Sanitation Workers

Dalit women constitute almost half of India's 160 million Dalits, comprise about 16% of India's total female population, and 8% of the total population. Despite all this, they are isolated on various axes- economic, religious, political and ideological. True of their experience in the mainstream women's movements, where most of them feel disconnected and alienated. In 2007, the report of the UN Committee Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) addressed the issue of Dalit women in India. Most women do not report violence. Only 1% of the cases that are actually filed end in convictions. The 2009 report of the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women accounts that Dalit women in India are: being raped and beaten by higher castes in the course of their daily lives, such as while working in the field, going to the market or doing domestic work. Very often, women academicians and fore-runners of the gender cause consider women as one homogenous group as far as the issues related to women are concerned. At the most disparities are superfluously addressed by way of socio-economic hierarchies. Slightest of similarities drawn in terms of discrimination and exclusion from access to resources and services between women and Dalits- is more likely than not to cause a furor. Both suffer subordination; both show poor social development indicators [10-12]. Both are considered impure and unclean. Both have been excluded from decision making processes at one or the other level. Both have restrictions in expressing their voices. Thus Dalit women's experience of denial is doubly loaded. Consider the expression of Manisha who work as a cleaner in a district in UP-

'I clean toilets in 20 houses every day. I use a tin plate and broom to remove the excrement that has collected in the toilet, I collect the excrement in a basket, and then I take it and throw it away. This work is so awful I don't feel like eating' (Manisha, Mainpuri district, Uttar Pradesh, January 2014). Similar is the story of Gangashree who 'walks through the village to manually clean human excrement from dry toilets in Kasela, Uttar Pradesh, which she will

collect in her basket and carry to the outskirts of the village for disposal'. (As observed by Digvijay Singh, 2014)<sup>5</sup>. It has been observed by the National Advisory Council<sup>6</sup> that 'Manual scavenging is the worst surviving symbol of untouchability'.

A study<sup>7</sup> done on 10,000 women manual scavengers in 15 districts of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh during 2013-2015 to understand their economic and political rights. The study reflected that 70% women got into manual scavenging after marriage while 30% were forced into it since childhood. Women were paid much lesser than men and often the amount was not fixed at many places. Most of them earned less than Rs 2000 per month. Half of manual scavenging families had no other source of income. The share of such families was as high as 83% in Uttar Pradesh. Only 2% of manual scavenging families had land holdings; and only 1% was involved in agriculture for additional income. Remunerations of these workers are meager and work guaranteed is nil. Municipal Corporation workers get Rs 150 per day and those working as contractual workers get between Rs. 40-50 a day [13]. They are often employed for less than 8 hours and paid accordingly anything between Rs 300-1500 per month.

## Social Identity of Sanitation Workers

All Safaikaramcharis (sanitation workers) are from the Dalit communities. This is the reason why their vulnerability is exploited by the people as well as the state. While environment and its conservation has caught everyone's attention; and there is evident concern for the users of sewerage and allied work by way of provisioning of and access to toilets, reduction in open defecation, Total Sanitation Campaign (TSC) and other programmes like provisioning of safe drinking water and clean drains; the concern for sewerage and allied service providers is absent. The plight of these people has not drawn much attention from the required sectors. Perhaps because of

<sup>5</sup><https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/08/25/cleaning-human-waste/manual-scavenging-caste-and-discrimination-india> (Accessed on 20 March 2016)

<sup>6</sup>National Advisory Council Resolution, October 23, 2010

<sup>7</sup> Jan Sahas- The Dignity Campaign- Action for Liberation of Dalit Manual Scavenger Women in India. Social Development Society and Fund for Gender Equality United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, UN Women, 2015.

the caste-ridden mind set, India has not been able to do away with a practice that is admittedly 'a blot on humanity'. Unlike the other parts of the world, in India, sewerage and allied work is associated with caste. This work passes on to the progeny and is considered as guaranteed employment and source of regular income. It strengthens caste identity and consolidates entrenchment of youth in the 'polluted work'.

The apathy of the state and the other fellow human beings towards the work conditions, incentives and remunerations and their living conditions of these workers is appalling. Their labour for cleaning the filth and grime and hazardous pollution generated is not appreciated. On the contrary, we the very people of this sovereign republic which ensure equality in all spheres through its Constitution, label them as unclean and polluted; call them names and treat them inhumanly. Considering them 'untouchables' is nothing short of that. The nation is indebted to them- 'the lesser human beings' for keeping the cost of cleaning to the lowest possible. Had it been for mechanization for the work done by these workers, the state would be paying anything to the tune of at least 10 times more.

### State Initiatives for Sanitation Workers

The government-delayed reaction against manual scavenging led to Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act in 1993. This act has provision of punishment and fine on employment of scavengers or on the construction of dry toilets. However, manual scavengers continue to be employed even by some municipalities, Indian Railways and Defense establishments and local authorities in rural areas. The Manual Scavenging is a disgrace casting doubts on governments' claim to overcome caste barriers and projecting itself as an economic growth engine. The governments' efforts to solve this problem have to be multidimensional.

First and foremost, expand the ambit of manual scavenging to include workers who clean the sewers, septic tanks, drains where human excreta are washed. Secondly, provide a rehabilitation programme for scavengers and their immediate family members. The purview of the programme could include training in other professions and technical educational. Arm the sanitation workers with state of the art technology tools. Developed nations have tools and equipment which protect sanitation workers from direct exposure to sewerage water and waste. Also, extend the benefit of RSBY scheme

to scavengers and their family members with provisions of free health checkup on regular basis. Finally, provide a financial safety net by extending subsidized loan for starting a new venture.

### Cleanliness Drive and Sanitation workers

The cleanliness drive endeavours to make the cleanliness 'a habit' so as to douse manual cleaning of lavatories. This will be implemented over a five-year period with a budget of nearly, INR 62,009 crore. The mission aims to cover 1.04 crore households, provide 2.5 lakh community toilets, 2.6 lakh public toilets, and a solid waste management facility in each town. The sanitation mission started with Total Sanitation Campaign- based on the principles of community-led total sanitation (CLTS) initiated by the Government of India in 1999. The programme shaped as Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan (NBA) during 1999 to 2012 and offered Nirmal Gram Puraskar to open defecation free villages. Under NBA Rs 10000 to every family to construct a toilet. On 2 October 2014 the NBA campaign was re launched as Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Mission) [14].

India has made some progress in providing sanitation by building toilets to desist people from defecating in the open. Despite the efforts, India still has longest queues for toilets in world<sup>8</sup>. Eradicating open defecation was the core objective of SBM. It aims to build 12 crore in rural India at a cost of 1.96 lakh crores by 2019. More than one crore toilets build as part of SBM since the launch of the Mission. However, the NSSO not even 50% are being used. Despite newly constructed lavatories, people continue to use fields and use the toilets for storing grains or as general storage space. Undoubtedly, providing clean toilets is important. But in the absence of water availability, the question arises of a choice between dirty, unusable, stinking toilets or open fields with fresh air. What will spark behavioral change towards ODF villages/spaces is important to be considered, especially in context of who will clean them.

### Global Development Goals and Sanitation Workers

The Millennium Development Goals (MDG) on sanitation emphasized on halving inequalities between riches and the poorest 20%; rural and urban; and slum-

<sup>8</sup>WND.com-21-Nov-2015 and Huffington Post-20-Nov-2015

non-slum. Technology and financing as constraint can be overcome but the 'biggest barrier in sanitation is the unwillingness of ... political leaders to put excreta and its safe disposal on the international development agenda' (HDR, 2006, UNDP,129). Those who lend their lives for 'safe disposal' are not within the purview of the MDG. The SDGs strive for 'leaving no one behind...' The BBC, 25 August 2014 reported that the Human Rights Watch has called on the Indian government to end "manual scavenging. The practice is banned by law but continues to be rampant. That is why even today India has more than 676,009 manual scavengers working in India ranging from about 150000 in UP to more than 80,000 in Madhya Pradesh and about 65000 in Maharashtra<sup>9</sup>.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim at 'leaving no one behind'. The SDG3 Ensure healthy lives and promotes well-being for all. The SDG 10 aspires to reduce inequality within and among countries. The resolve is that (a) by 2030, empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status; (b) ensure equal opportunity and reduce inequalities of outcome by eliminating discriminatory laws, policies and practices and promoting appropriate legislation, policies and action in this regard; and (c) adopt policies, especially fiscal, wage and social protection policies, and progressively achieve greater equality. The UN Secretary-General Ban-ki-Moon emphasized that the SDGs are based on six essential elements- dignity, people, prosperity, planet, justice and partnership.

The issue goes beyond poverty, indifference, lack of awareness, or reluctance to switch from traditional work. Attitude towards manual scavenging is rooted in caste as much as caste is rooted in India's social structure and Indians' mindset. The need is to look within ourselves and reconsider our perceptions of these people whose contribution towards the upkeep of the environment is second to none; and resolve to give them what is due to them since long. The dignity and social inclusion, to begin with, will gradually make way for access to resources.

Therefore, it is absolutely important to say no to 'polluted jobs'. For this the following needs to be done by the individuals and the state. At the individual level, reconstruction of self- image; determination to completed education against all odds; looking for alternative to enhance skills; increase vocational propensity; and above

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

all, avoid and overcome the trap of 'government job' in the name of sewerage cleaning and assured risk to life. The state's responsibility is towards mechanization of sewerage and sanitation work; adequate allocation of funds for safety and health of the current workers; and education of their children. Urban planners; public health specialist; civil engineers need to practice and evolve courses to sensitize human friendly management of waste. Poor access to resources has perpetuated low levels of development for a long time. Some sub-castes among SCs engage in work which other caste persons do not do. Such work is detrimental to their health and paradoxically, is considered as 'polluted jobs'. There is a need for data on these specific groups engaged in 'polluted jobs'; their access to medical/para -medical health care, education, employment opportunities and civic amenities.

The true tribute to Dr. Ambedkar would be to continue with his efforts of empowering the lives of the vulnerable and downtrodden and help them overcome the vicious cycle of caste and culture barrier. Access to civic amenities and social facilities has always been a concern in the context of the Dalits. While much of the literature has explored social discrimination in general; and partly in the field of education; not much seems to reflect on the experience of social discrimination and humiliation experienced by those engaged in scavenging and cleaning in their daily life and in rendering their services. Their access to health care, housing, education, basic infrastructure; provisions for work related safety, safeguards against health hazards, information on various scheme oriented towards their welfare; and utilisation of such schemes- all have largely remained confined as outcome figures. The process which precedes these outcomes has never or rarely given any importance. It is for this reason that despite government measures towards affirmative action during last few decades, the episodes of death due to humiliation and attack on dignity continue in the form of students committing suicide in premium institutions and girls and women being paraded unclothed in different parts of the country.

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